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## THE NATURAL HISTORY OF SACRED BOOKS.

### SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR A PREFACE TO THE HISTORY OF THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE.

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THE study of comparative religion is destined to exercise a profound influence on every branch of Christian theology. We are coming to see that many of the cherished doctrines of our own religion are not peculiar to Christianity, but have their parallels in other faiths. This must in time lead us to form new estimates of them and to recognize in our own beliefs not only the result of a special revelation to ourselves, but the outcome of forces and tendencies of human nature which have been at work in many lands. The Christian student must more and more be led to admit that he cannot fully understand a doctrine in his own religion till he has studied the parallel instances in which it is found, and has tried to trace the root in human nature which has produced the same or similar fruits in different races and in far separate climes. To take an example, the teacher of Christian theology will come to treat the Christian doctrine of a future life in connection with the Chinese worship of ancestors and the belief of the old Egyptians as to the journey which awaited them through the dark underworld, with the Elysian plains of Greece and the Valhalla of the Norsemen, as well as with the Buddhist Nirvana. In setting forth the essential nature of Christian worship, he will discuss the instinct which prompted the sacrifice of primitive times as well as those present in the elaborate rituals of India and of Greece and Rome. Thus theology will become a much broader study than it has been apt to prove; it will ally itself with more various learning, and it will grow more universal, more humane, and will interest many more minds. Nor in this wider study of theology is there any danger, rather is there the

strongest possible safeguard, to what is deepest and most substantial in our own most dear religion. When we find that a doctrine which we hold is common to us with men of other faiths, we have discovered an additional evidence of its truth and value. If Christianity should prove to possess many such doctrines, it will not be the less but the more entitled on that account to be considered the consummation of all the religions of the world, the goal which they have all been seeking, the attainment in which all who have hitherto adhered to them may be called to receive their share.

In what way may these remarks be applied to the doctrine of sacred Scripture which we hold? There is no need to insist on the importance of a trustworthy foundation for this doctrine. To the Christian it is a matter of no slight moment to be assured that the books of Scripture occupy the place they hold by a good warrant and that no mistake of great importance has been made regarding them; and the heathen also who are invited to accept Christianity may reasonably ask for evidence of this. The Bible, it is well known, is not the only collection of sacred writings; other religions also have their bibles and have claimed for them divine inspiration. And it is becoming more and more difficult, both on historical and on moral grounds, to maintain the old position that the doctrine of divine inspiration is true in the one case of the Christian Scriptures and false in all the other cases in which it is made. The problem stands as follows:

A number of religions possess among their sacred treasures collections of written works which are held to have come into the world in a different way from that in which books are commonly produced.

Among the Indo-European races this phenomenon presents itself twice on a large scale in India, where we have the two sacred collections of Brahmanism and of Buddhism; and it also presents itself in the case of Persia. Among the Semites we meet with it in Israel and Islam. It is also found in Christianity, in connection with a community which is not, as in most of the other cases, national in its origin, but shares the cosmopolitan character of the Roman Empire. These are the principal

cases, but there are many others. How is this phenomenon to be accounted for? What makes books sacred? Can we point to any general law in the growth of religious communities which implies that a religion should at a certain stage in its development form a collection of sacred books? If we were in the company of a Brahman, a Mohammedan, a Buddhist, a Jew and a Christian, and if we put to each of them the same question, On what grounds do you consider your religious books sacred? How did they come to be so, and what do the books you hold so sacred do for you, to justify the character you give them?—would the answer returned to the question contain any common principle? Is the sacredness of books due in all cases to the same cause, or may sacredness be added to books in more ways and from more motives than one?

These questions could not be answered fully without extensive investigations and discussions on a considerable scale. Neither of these would be in place in the pages of this journal, and what is offered here is no more than a few suggestions as to the lines which, if I see rightly, the inquiry must follow. I trust that young and able hands will be attracted to a field so full of promise.<sup>1</sup>

There are two things to be accounted for: in the first place, the sacredness of words or books, and, in the second, the formation of sacred collections. In some cases forms of words are recognized as sacred long before they are brought together in a canon. Canonization sometimes confers sacredness, but sometimes it is no more than the recognition of facts already existing. Our first inquiry then is, How do words become sacred? Is this always due to the same motive, or may it arise from a variety of considerations? Here we must evidently go back to an early period and consult the student of early societies and practices as well as the historians of known times. Our second inquiry, What are the conditions under which the canonization of books takes place? is concerned with facts which are not in general very obscure.

<sup>1</sup> For a short statement of the positions occupied by the various sacred collections in their respective religions, I may be allowed to refer to the chapters of my *History of*

## I. HOW DO WORDS ACQUIRE SACREDNESS?

Many people would answer this question, if it were put to them, by saying that sacred words are the words of sacred or inspired persons. The books of the New Testament are said, in their titles, to be the works of "Saints" or of holy men; and these saints are supposed to have written under the direction of a sacred influence or "Holy Spirit." But this explanation does not apply to all the cases we have to consider. Especially if we begin at the beginning, as we must do if we are to obtain a rational view of the whole subject, we shall find that it scarcely helps us at all. We are met at the outset of our inquiry by a class of words of power which are, generally speaking, anonymous. It is difficult to say of the words held in reverence by the earliest men whether anyone knew or pretended to know who had first uttered them, and it is safe to say that it was not on account of their origin that they possessed their power. Authority has here little to do with authorship. I refer, of course, to that host of spells, charms, curses, and incantations which plays so great a part in early history and legend. These are the earliest sacred words.

Their character is in accordance with that of the period of religious growth to which they belong. We shall find afterwards that along with each advance made to a higher religious principle a higher type of religious discourse also comes into view. Now the spells and charms of which we are speaking here belong to the animistic period of religion; to the age, that is to say, preceding that of the worship of gods, or of religion properly so-called; when many spirits filled the place afterwards occupied by regular gods, and magic stood in the place afterwards occupied by stated worship as the method of communicating with unseen beings. To deal with spirits one does not require histories or treatises or psalms; something shorter and pithier answers the purpose much more effectively. What the sorcerer, who comes before the priest, requires in the way of words for his transactions with the powers of the air with whom he has to deal

*Religion* (Murray, 1895, University Extension Series; American publishers, Charles Scribner's Sons).

is a good strong phrase or two; if it be unintelligible it counts as a mystery, and it is none the worse for its purpose, but rather the better. As for the authorship of the sentences so used, it is a matter of perfect indifference. One does not ask who first spoke it, but whether it will serve the purpose. This is the characteristic of the sacred words of early times. They are words which have virtue in them. When spoken at the proper time and place and with the accompaniment of the due gift and gesture, they have an intrinsic power to bring about the desired result. Thus the wishing-well has its appropriate formula of words without which the visit to the well cannot be successful. The door of the cave opens only to "Sesame." He who gathers herbs for a good or for an evil purpose (at a certain state of the moon) must recite some old form while he does so. In Grimm's *Fairy Tales* or in any collection of folklore the reader will find many such old forms.

We may mention specially the forms of words used in ancient times in the imitative worship of nature. The mysterious ceremonies resorted to in time of drought had their appropriate words to be chanted by the procession or at the moment of the central act. Everyone has heard of the Arval brothers of Rome, who went to the country at certain seasons and performed ceremonies bearing on the fertility of the soil, and who used rhymes which the literary Romans no longer understood. Formulæ used for the same purpose may still be heard in some of the more backwood countries of Europe. Nature is assisted by being shown what she is desired to do, in some rude imitative act, or a spell is used which has power over the spirit supposed to be in charge of the particular natural operation which is in question; while in many cases the aim is to thwart and drive away the evil spirits believed to be always at hand and bent on working mischief.

We should also notice the old saws, warnings, and forecasts current among every old people, handed down from former generations and traceable to no known author, but believed to be prophetic and to be big with a meaning which is to be disclosed when the man or the event appears. Many of the tragedies

both of ancient and of more modern times turn upon some motive of this kind. The "Œdipus" of Sophocles, Shakespeare's "Macbeth" and Scott's *Guy Mannering* afford some notable instances.

Such were the earliest words of awe. If in primitive times there was little or no continuous discourse believed to come from a higher being, words were not wanting in which men felt themselves brought near to the mystery of things, and furnished to some small extent with instruments of relief from the pains and ills threatening their existence. It may be thought trifling to open a discussion on sacred books by pointing to such old tatters of superstition. But they must be spoken of in this connection, because they do not come to an end with the passing away of the religious age to which they are appropriate, but survive and play an important part in religious literature proper. Forms of words which are revered not for their authorship, of which nothing is known, but on account of the virtue thought to reside in the words themselves, still make their appearance in some religious books which have been much extolled. The oldest of the Babylonian hymns are those which are aimed at evil spirits and are thought capable of driving such spirits away and keeping them at a distance. When a man was sick these ancient Babylonians had recourse to a hymn, one hymn being good in the case of fits, another for toothache. And other sacred books have had their chapters used in the same way. The Egyptian Book of the Dead, so much admired for the moral exaltation of a few of its chapters, is for the most part nothing but a set of charms written on the dead man's coffin that he might have them at hand to open the gates he had to pass through, and to gather together the scattered elements of his person, in order that he might not fail to have a happy life beyond. In these cases we have sacred words of the very earliest kinds embedded in writings of later age and higher character and so preserved. The Sibylline Books preserved at Rome were a collection of old prophecies and warnings from which it was thought possible to obtain guidance for the state in times of public emergency. The name and the idea of such prophetic books were afterwards

employed in other ways, and in connection with prophetic works which enjoyed a high reputation. Thus do old ideas on the subject of sacred words survive. After discourse of a much higher type has made its appearance, words are still held sacred because of the occult power thought to reside in them. They are valued not for any truth or beauty they possess; that indeed could scarcely be, but for what they are able to do when properly applied.

From the innumerable swarm of spirits, the beings thought of by the earliest men in their dealings with the unseen world, the gods gradually raise their heads. A god is a being of definite character settled at a certain place, sought of those who believe in him by stated rites, surrounded by a regular body of worshippers, be they tribe, family, or nation. And this new worship produces along with other things its own sacred words. It produces them in two ways and of two kinds. First it has the words which are the result of growth and long tradition, and are sacred without being connected with any human speaker. And then it produces words of a more personal nature; for it is in this form of religion that the phenomenon of inspiration proper takes its rise.

Around these great beings whose rise brings to human society a new principle of unity, and to the imagination new ideas of strength, grandeur, and tenderness, various forms of words gradually gather, which on account of their connection with the gods come to be held sacred. These products are also for the most part anonymous and belong rather to the things which are developed by long-continued natural processes than to those which are produced by individual minds. In the first place a set of stories is formed about the gods. They become a center round which all sorts of old tradition and legends, often repulsive enough, crystallize. A kind of history begins, with the gods for its principal heroes. The origin of the god is explained by a narrative; if he is a solar god the experiences of the sun are turned into a story of the great being who dies to live again; or some curious usage belonging to his worship or geographical peculiarity connected with the place where he is found has a legend



to account for it. A mythology thus grows up; and among a people of active minds it may in time assume enormous extent and complexity. In time many of the stories composing it grow unintelligible, and some of them prove revolting to improving taste. The original motives are lost; what is left is but a set of rude remains. But the mythology does not lose its sacredness because it is no longer understood. As the gods rise in dignity and in character the stories relating to them are invested with deeper mystery. When reason turns away from them, they become objects of faith, and the pious, not able to discard them, resort to mystical and allegorical interpretations such as simpler generations would have scorned. The obvious meaning of the divine legends is abandoned, but they are held to have a hidden or mystical meaning, and this serves for a time to keep them alive.

And if the early state, for it is at that stage of social growth that we now are, sees the stories and legends of the gods grow into sacredness, it also finds its laws grow sacred. The view prevails throughout the whole of the ancient world that the structure of society, the acquisition of which adds so immensely to the dignity and effectiveness of human life, is a divine work, and that the rules and maxims of conduct which are generally recognized are divinely given. In communities where church and state are still one, this must be so. The king when he acts as judge represents the god who is the unseen head of the state, all offenses are committed against God, and the important sentences pronounced by the judge in various cases become principles of a law which has more than merely human sanction. Thus a body of statutes or judgments is formed which God is believed to uphold, and the unwritten code which thus arises has a religious character and will when written down take rank as a sacred book. Laws are apt to be handed down in an anonymous form; as the community accepts them they are ascribed to a source higher than any human lawgiver and continue to exist and to be in force though their author is not named. It is later that the codifier comes and gathers into one *corpus* the various laws and smaller codes he finds existing. Then the finished

code may be called by his name or by that of an older, perhaps a partly mythical, lawgiver. In some cases this is the first sacred book existing in the nation and becomes the nucleus of the religious collection afterwards formed. Every sacred literature contains more or less material of this kind.

The words connected with religion which we have met with up to this point are all of an impersonal character. They are held in reverence for their own sake rather than that of their reputed author. It is a great step in the development of the subject when we come to the phenomenon of direct inspiration, and to the character of the prophet or specially inspired person. The prophet succeeds, in the higher plane of the religion of gods, to the position occupied by the sorcerer in the worship of spirits. He stands in the same place socially as his predecessor, and practices some of the same arts; but the resemblance ends there. The prophet is the organ of an unseen power much greater than any known to the sorcerer; a god speaks through him as no spirit could, and his utterances have a new character. They have to do with keeping up the bond which exists not sporadically but permanently between the god and his people, and aim at making the connection living and effective. The words of the prophet have therefore a moral character. While he may often be consulted in trivial matters, such as the recovery of strayed asses or the hard case of the workman who has dropped his axe into the water, he also has the power of appealing to king and people at great crises; he can rebuke an arrogant ruler and can remind the people of the claims their god has on them, when these are being forgotten. At this point, therefore, sacred words of a new class come into view; those spoken by known persons under the inspiration of known gods, and afterwards preserved in memory or by writing. The oracles of Greece, some of which were of great influence both in shaping the policy of states and in raising the moral tone of the nation, belong to some extent to this class of sacred words; but it is among the Semitic peoples that the character of the prophet is most developed, and that he acts most independently. What large additions are made in this way to the world's sacred lore, every

one knows. Words spoken at first perhaps to meet an immediate practical purpose or in answer to some inquiry are remembered long after their occasion has passed away. The prophet may not have thought them so sacred as they afterwards appeared. Mahomet probably stands alone among the great figures of the prophetic order in having regarded his own utterances from the very outset as possessing authority for all men. But the prophet's authority for inspiration once established, his words rise in authority. The judgments and laws he pronounced are held sacred as well as his oracles; when his words are written, the book rapidly advances in sacredness, and the words it contains are thought to be pregnant with divine truth, and as they cease to be understood, with recondite mysteries, to be interpreted by processes with which sound exegesis has little in common.

The Vedic hymns occupy a peculiar position in the subject we are discussing. They are sacred for two distinct reasons which are scarcely compatible with one another. The authors of these venerable poems did not at first claim any special guidance from above. They describe their own work of literary production in words which show them to consider their hymns, wonderful as they are, as the fruit of their own efforts, and not as the gift of any supernatural afflatus. Later generations, however, took a different view of their work; the hymns were regarded as being of divine and not of human origin; they were classed among the "s'ruti" or hearing, as if the human poets had had nothing to do but to take down what was brought to their ears. But there is another reason for the sacredness of these poems. The hymn was an integral part of the Vedic sacrifice, that apparatus of stupendous magnitude and inexpressible cogency by which the harmony of heaven and earth, and even the regular course of nature itself, was believed to be maintained. Without the hymn the sacrifice was not complete, and could not secure the desired result; and thus the hymn was a kind of supernatural spell or incantation. The words then are sacred not only as being produced by inspired writers, but on account of the potency they possess in themselves; and thus, while the

Vedic hymns belong in their origin to the higher level of sacred writings, their use degrades them to the earlier and lower. They derive sacredness from their employment and from the effects they produce in the sacred ritual. In practice they are held sacred on both grounds; on the one hand they are due to an inspired author, and on the other they possess virtue in themselves. Persian religion in the same way appears to have possessed hymns before Zarathustra, which were esteemed because of the effect they produced. Zarathustra is found praying in one of the Gathas that it may be given to men to offer the best sacrifices accompanied by the most effectual hymns. The reader may possibly think of more recent instances in which a religious ceremony is believed to produce a supernatural effect, and act coöperates with spell to make the effect sure, with the result that the spoken words come to possess an ineffable sanctity.

A further step in religious development, and new motives for holding writings sacred come into play. Religion ceases to be a branch or an aspect of the state, is organized into a separate establishment of its own, and freely giving effect to its own impulses builds up a great edifice in which nothing is wanting. This takes place when the community as a whole comes afresh under the power of religion so that the state is transformed into a church, and its resources, material and intellectual, are enlisted in the service of the deity. It also takes place when a new religion is founded which is energetic enough to create a set of new forms for the expression of its own spirit, and to place upon the world a great religious institution. When this comes to pass books can become sacred in a new way, and religious books of a new type or of more than one new type are called into existence.

In the first place the new religious community has a set of new institutions, new laws, and a new ritual. As soon as the institutions, laws, and ritual cease to be new, or as soon as a new generation is born after the first believers and finds these great things existing in the world, clothed with the power of mighty facts and powerfully engaging love and reverence—as soon as

this takes place books are called in to satisfy the curiosity of the faithful as to the origin and history of their movement and of their various practices. There are many things to be explained. Members wish to know what is the reason of such and such an obscure point in the ritual, or of the position in the community of such and such families and guilds, or of such and such conditions of admission to the order. These explanations naturally take the form of history, and even when the history supplied in this way is not genuine, but made up to serve the purpose, the books containing it have a strong chance of obtaining favor with the faithful and becoming part of the archives of the religion. Thus the ætiological tradition spoken of before, which aims at accounting for interesting things and practices, has a new lease of life in connection with some of the great religions. In primitive times there were ætiological traditions or legends to explain why the rabbit had so short a tail, or why a certain rock had a peculiar shape. Now, such legends are produced to explain why this victim rather than that is chosen for a certain sacrifice, or why the members of the religious order observe a certain practice. The Brahmanical sacred books are full of divine legends explaining various points in the sacrificial ritual. The works narrating the life and teaching of Gautama are full of stories which are evidently intended to settle disputed points as to conditions of entrance to the order, or as to its discipline, by showing what view the master himself took of them. The adherents of an infant faith naturally look for further light than they have received at first as to what is required of them. Difficulties occur which the original teaching does not solve, and new situations arise in which the path of duty is not plain. In many a form the question presents itself, whether the primary rules of the community are to be rigidly carried out in all cases, or whether, from the weakness of human flesh and for the sake of attracting those outside, some compromise may be allowed. Stories about the founder may exist which bear on such points; and if they do not exist at first they may be invented, or there may be stories bearing on the point which though connected with a later period of the faith may yet

be worthy of attention. But while the ætiological motive is undoubtedly responsible for large parts of some of the sacred collections, religious histories are also written in which that motive has little share. Every religion, at least, which has a personal founder is strongly interested in having a true history of its beginnings. Every spiritual movement must of necessity look back to its origin in order to realize itself and to gain strength for the accomplishment of its task, and in accordance with this law there is the deepest desire in every such community to know all about the prophet or the master, to hear his words and observe his actions. It is at the source, where the ideal was actually touched which all religious effort afterwards strives to reconquer, that the spirit of the community feels itself at home. This is with some qualifications a truly historical motive, and the books produced in obedience to it become the most precious treasures of the religious body. The books which place the believer where the first disciples stood, which enable him to listen to the Master's words, and overhear perhaps even his secret thoughts and prayers, so that he feels for himself what that spirit was which reached the Master from the upper region and passed forth from him to other men, those books soon grow dear to all the faithful, and are used more and raised to a greater height than any others. They may be prized for other reasons than this, and regarded as oracles, as one of the earliest Christian collections (the *λόγια*) was, but the genuine historical interest is not wanting. On the same principle, though in a less degree, narratives about the first disciples and about the early struggles of the faith are soon irradiated with a sacred light. And works written by the companions of the Master or by those who stood near to him, if they taught the doctrine or explained its practical bearings, or made any sketch of a constitution to embody it, these also are enshrined in pious regard.

And here we observe that such historical books as we have now spoken of are received from higher motives than those which led to the recognition of some other classes of books spoken of above. Histories of the founder and of his followers

are not accepted by the faithful because of any outward effects they can produce. They work no charms; they do not, except very indirectly, keep demons at a distance; they do not reveal the future; they are not supposed to act as spells when read at public worship, or to compel heaven and earth to be in harmony. Even if they were not used in worship at all they would still be cherished with the warmest affection. Nor are they prized for the explanations they furnish of existing views and usages; that, indeed, they are often very far from doing. The effects they produce are not outward, they have apparently no inherent virtue; what they do is only in the mind of the believer. They bring him near to the source and the object of his faith, which they renew in him as at the first. They light no fires outside, but light up in his heart the fires of enthusiasm and love. They unite him to what he feels to be most vital in his religion, and he therefore holds them dear, even though he should recognize in them no supernatural character and should even be in doubt as to their authorship.

The devotional and didactic books which find their way into the sacred collections stand, from the ethical point of view, on the same plane as those just spoken of. They are loved before they are thought sacred; they would not have been held sacred had they not become the vehicle of the holy thoughts of multitudes, or had they not set forth views of the faith generally held by the believers. At the late stage of religious growth at which such works appear a dominant motive of their recognition as sacred must be held to be that of moral and intellectual approval. Other and earlier motives are no doubt still operative even at this stage. Books are held sacred because they bear, truly or untruly, the names of apostles or saints, because they are orthodox, because they bear out existing church usages, because they are thought to be oracles. Such considerations may no doubt carry a book into the canon which does not strongly recommend itself to moral and spiritual instincts. But as a rule books are not received at the stage of religion now before us unless they have secured the moral approbation of the body of the faithful and are felt to be in the main true and useful and edifying.

One more method we have to mention by which additions are made to sacred collections. When commentaries are written on books of acknowledged authority, and are themselves in due time accepted as valid interpretations of these works, the comment comes to partake of the sacred character of the text; the tradition of the elders takes its place beside, and may even to some extent supplant, the law of God. The Zend is the commentary on the Avesta, and the name Zendavesta indicates that the commentary was accepted as an essential part of the sacred collection. In Indian sacred literature this principle is responsible for the most enormous additions to the earlier books.

It may be convenient to sum up in a tabular form the results of the foregoing discussion. We have seen that the world has possessed at various times words and books held sacred from a number of different considerations. These may be arranged in the following classes :

*A. Words not attributed to any individual author.*

1. Words containing a charm and enabling him who uses them aright to obtain the fulfillment of his wishes, to cope with evil spirits, to assist or call forth the operations of nature, etc.

2. Words containing a prophecy, the fulfillment of which is still to come, and which may, if properly interpreted and applied, guide human conduct and policy.

3. Old myths and legends.

4. Laws setting forth the fundamental duties of individuals, and the conditions of the welfare of societies, held to have been given by the deity and to have his sanction.

*B. Words uttered by known persons, in early stages of religion.*

1. Oracles given by a deity through his stated representatives at his accustomed seat ; in many cases still awaiting their accomplishment.

2. Words and discourses, preserved in tradition or in writing, of men believed to be inspired.

3. Hymns and formulæ connected with worship and considered essential to the due and effective performance of religious functions (A. 1 at a later stage).



*C. Books connected with the early stages of great religious movements.*

1. Historical: (a) ætiological stories and legends; (b) historical narratives.
2. Devotional and didactic works.
3. Works dealing with the ritual and with the constitution of religious communities.
4. Commentaries on books already sacred.

For the purpose of classification we may enumerate all these different classes of religious discourse, but in practice they are found like geological strata, overlapping and mixed up together, though still recognizable. Each set of sacred books, with the exception of those of Christianity, contains materials belonging to the remote past and to different subsequent periods. The stock of religious sentences, legends, and narratives is liable to be taken up by one hand after another, each framing them in a new setting belonging to his own day and thus making them appear in a new light. The Pentateuch finally obtained sacredness as a book of law and as the constitution of a community, but materials are embedded in it which obtained sacredness originally in most if not all of the ways spoken of above. History and legend, anonymous words of ancient wisdom, oracles yet unfulfilled, stories explaining religious usages, devotional and didactic discourse, all are there along with ritual matter which, if critics tell us truly, came into the collection last of all. The Babylonian texts contain, along with the deeds of kings, very ancient spells and legends. As long as the sacred words of a nation remain in flux and are not fixed in a canon, they are subject to incessant modification and rearrangement. Nor is the older matter always assimilated to the character of the newer setting. Tales of which the savage origin is but thinly veiled lie ultimately side by side with the laws of a highly civilized constitution and with the loftiest spiritual aspirations. The principles of different epochs, though in reality inconsistent with each other, are both stated in the same collection. All the miscellaneous property the nation has acquired in the way of religious narrative or discourse, in its passage through the

different stages of civilization and by its borrowings from various neighbors—all this, as well as the record of its own special experience in sacred things, lies at last stored up together in its sacred literature.

## II. WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH THE CANONIZATION OF BOOKS TAKES PLACE?

Every country and every religion has its store of sacred words and stories. The production of these takes place in every land; and whenever they survive till the arrival of a literary age they become the themes of authors and are woven together and set forth in written books. Nor can any fresh religious movement take place in a civilized country without setting in motion a literary movement of its own and producing its own narratives and treatises. But while every people possesses such properties in connection with its religion, not every people makes the same use of them. In some cases the existing religious lore is gathered together in a sacred canon. The religious organization, that is to say, draws up a catalogue of the books which are recognized and received, and these belong thenceforward to the sacred things of the religion. They are exalted above other books, perhaps above others which are very like them; they are regarded as inspired in a way in which no others are. These books become an integral part of the religion; in them it sees its standard, and recognizes the secret of its strength and the guarantee of its historical continuity. They form the official expression in writing of what is believed and aimed at, and when any dispute arises they are appealed to for their verdict. The outsider who wishes to know what the religion amounts to must go to them for satisfaction. So it is in the case of some of the great religions; but in the case of others it is not so. Some great religions have never formed a canon. If at one time there were books setting forth their belief and practice, these books have never been accepted by the religion as a whole or adopted as its standard, and in consequence they have been forgotten and have disappeared. These religions have accordingly no official documents by which they may be known. The student has to

collect his knowledge of them in other directions. From the spirit they impressed upon their peoples, from what is known of their rites and ceremonies, from their artistic remains, and from the evidence supplied by secular writers—from these and other such quarters he has to find out about them what he can.

What is the reason of this great difference in the use various nations have made of their religious lore? How does it come that Greece and Rome, in whose religions so much is found that is of value for all time, formed no collections of religious literature? The same is the case with China, in spite of her imposing ritual continued for millenniums. Books China has which all educated men must study, but they are not sacred books; they make no claim to a religious character. Why are these religions so poor in this respect while Brahmanism has an immense collection of sacred books, and Islam was embodied in such a book from its very cradle?

Let us consider first the case of those religions which formed no sacred canon. If the question be asked why China, Greece, and Rome formed no collection of religious books, in which the norm of their religions was to be recognized, it might be enough to reply that the books are wanting which might have lent themselves to such a purpose. No collection of sacred books can be made where there are no sacred books to collect. Not every book, not every religious book, will serve the purpose of a sacred collection, and in Greece and Rome, at least (of China I am not able to speak in this connection), the right kind of book appears to have been wanting. Writings which are to find their way into a canon must be about religious subjects in which all the faithful feel an interest and with regard to which they are at one, and they must be written in the interests of the religion as a working system and capable of nourishing enthusiasm for the cause and assisting faith. If no such books exist, religious collections may be made, indeed, but the people in general will not care for them and they will not live long. Now in Greece literature was not under the influence of the working religion, and stood as a whole quite apart from it. The literature of Greece worked powerfully for the religion of subsequent ages, but was of little assistance to

the priests of its own day. The philosophers who were to rule the belief of after times moved in a world of thought quite apart from that of the church of their own neighbors, as philosophers are apt to do. The attempts made by the Orphic writers, and afterwards by the tragedians under their influence, to weld the religious thought of Greece into a system and to infuse into it a new life and enthusiasm, did not succeed. In Greece, as also in Rome, where the same relations were reproduced between the system of worship and the world of thought and literature, religion produced no books suited for a canon, no books in which the nation as a whole was interested and which the living church could acknowledge as expressing her own thought.

The explanation we have offered of the absence of any canon of scripture in the religions of Greece and Rome differs somewhat from that which is usually given. What is generally said on the question is that a sacred canon is the work of an organized priesthood, and that neither in Greece nor in Rome was the priesthood sufficiently organized to impose its will in this way upon the nation. That is undoubtedly the case. In neither of these instances did the priesthood take the form of an organized national hierarchy. Religion never came to be either in these cases, or it may be added in the case of China or in that of Egypt, a homogeneous, national system. In none of these countries did the priests ever find themselves at one in their teaching or combine to recognize one special doctrine as that which was to be propagated throughout the nation. Greek religion, to take it as typical of the others in this respect, remained to the end local, devoid of system or combination. Greek priests formed no presbyteries or synods and recognized no sovereign pontiff or convocation. In Rome there was plenty of organization but there was no life-giving or unifying spirit, as there was no generally accepted creed, to make the various priesthoods and colleges realize their membership with one another in one body. The same might be shown, if we had time, of China and Egypt. And so it came to pass that none of these countries came to have a bible, a definite collection of books embodying the doctrine of the national religion. There was no

body with authority enough to form and hand over to the nation such a collection.

We see, then, that there are two essential conditions of the formation of a canon. The first is the existence of books which the nation is prepared to recognize as the norm of its religion. The second is the existence of a religious authority of sufficient power to prescribe to the nation what books it shall receive as that norm. In the cases we have named neither of these conditions has been fulfilled. And it takes no great insight to recognize that these two conditions are intimately connected with each other. Where no religious doctrine is attained which dominates the mind of the nation as a whole and prompts the writing of works embodying the essence of the national beliefs and aspirations, there the priesthood have no central standard around which they may feel themselves one body, they remain isolated from each other and disunited, and cannot possibly present for national acceptance any religious law or sacred canon.

And now we are in position to consider the case of nations which have canons, and to attempt a brief and tentative statement of the conditions under which sacred collections are formed. The soil from which such a plant is reared is a nation which has taken religion for its central interest either by natural predisposition and from the earliest times, or at some later period of its history, under the stress of some terrible reverse, or at the commanding word of a great religious reformer. In a nation which turns its mind principally to religion, social and intellectual growth must follow certain well-known lines. Those who devote themselves to religious acts and studies will be regarded by those who labor at other callings with respect and deference. Their families will stand in honor, their leisure will be thought to be their due, their words will be of weight. They, in their turn, will devote themselves to that which has exalted them, and will do all they can to make religion great, splendid, and awful. Especially will they treat the sacred words and legends of the nation with what literary power they possess, fitting the old words for the use of the new age, stripping them of grossness

and obscurity and making them worthy vehicles and incentives of living piety. Thus the highest intellectual power of the nation will be engaged in the service of religion, and by degrees a new literature will arise which will quickly grow dear to the nation as the expression of its truest thoughts and deepest feelings. This literature may not at first be thought to be inspired; the writers may be too well known, and their methods of working too well understood by their neighbors for such a view to be held about them. But when the figure of the author disappears, and the hymn or narrative he wrote still continues in use, enshrined it may be in acts of worship, and rising gradually to a height where it is beyond criticism and irradiated by the sacred lamp that burns within the shrine, then the hymn or narrative begins to rank as sacred. It is not like other writings; it cannot have been produced, men begin to think, in the ordinary way. The writer did not produce it as common writers produce their works; it was shown to him, revealed to him, by a higher power.

Here the conditions exist for the formation of a sacred canon. The act itself takes place when the religion realizes that it has come to have a settled place in the world and that a great future lies before it. The early struggles and persecutions are over, and the doubts and uncertainties which accompany the first stages of every spiritual movement—these also are overcome. The cause has fought its battles and has won some measure of peace from its enemies round about, and now it begins to see that it has conquered a kingdom for itself, not only in the spiritual world, but in the world of earthly dominions and policies. That kingdom has now to be set in order. The confusions of the time of struggle are to be succeeded by the orderly arrangements of a time of peace. The available resources are counted up, offices are adjusted, rules are made. And among the matters which call for regulation is the matter of sacred books. Doubts may exist which books among a number of existing religious works are to be regarded as authoritative. The limits must be drawn. Books everywhere received and used obtain official sanction; with regard to others the authorities may

express themselves as being in doubt, and may leave over a final decision for time and further experience. And the books received must be arranged. The Buddhist canon consists of three baskets, or collections. In other cases there is but one catalogue, perhaps with an appendix of those books whose position is not yet finally determined. Some canons are fixed definitely, once for all, so that no addition is afterwards possible. The Koran was completed in a few years. Some remain more open, so that for centuries afterwards the canon may receive successive extensions. But the first step once taken in the process, the first catalogue of authoritative books once drawn up by the leaders of the religion and accepted in principle if not in every detail by the community, a change of momentous importance and irrevocable in its nature has taken place. That these books are the canon of the religion is thenceforward a fact of history which cannot be got rid of. Whether it be possible for the adherents of a religion in an enlightened age long afterwards to go behind some of the sacred books and to attach their faith more closely than even some of the sacred writers did to the spirit of the founder we need not now discuss. Where this is attempted with any likelihood of success a great schism in the religion is probably at hand. As the formation of the canon is not the work of a day, but the outcome of a long growth which has its roots deep in national character and history, so the change or reform of a canon is so large a matter as not to be easily conceivable. So long as a religion remains alive it must carry with it this essential member of its structure.

What was undertaken in this paper is now, in a sense, fulfilled. Suggestions have been made as to the various ways in which words and discourses are attached to religion and acquire authority and sacredness. And an attempt has been made to point out the conditions under which a religion draws up a catalogue of its sacred collection of materials. A few considerations are offered in conclusion as to the distinctive peculiarities of the Christian collection of books as compared with other sacred canons. What most of all gives our Bible its hold upon our imagination and our heart we do not attempt to

set forth, but only those of its merits which men of all religions must in reason recognize.

1. The outstanding feature of the Christian Bible is that it contains the canons of two religions. The church adopted the Bible of the synagogue before it made any collection of its own, and the Jewish Scriptures count as the first division of the sacred books of Christianity. All attempts to dissolve this union and to limit the Christian Scriptures to books of Christian origin have failed signally. Now one consequence of this is that the Bible as a whole is not a national book. As Christianity prevailed not as the religion of a nation, but as the religion of an empire embracing many nations, so the Christian Bible as a whole is not the work of any one nation but of the catholic church, and has thus a cosmopolitan character.

2. What is national in the Bible belongs to the Jewish nation. Now the Jewish canon is singularly free from what we may call pre-ethical religious matter, from writings belonging to the stage before religion became a moral relationship. Perhaps spells and exorcisms may be found in the Bible; perhaps it contains legends of a somewhat rude and primitive kind; but these do not stand forth prominently; they have to be looked for. Whether the makers of the Jewish canon eliminated such matters, which are found so plentifully in other sacred collections, or in whatever way it came about, the Old Testament gives no countenance to superstition, but places before us in the main a religion which is moral, in which God and his people are related together as king and vassals, or as father and children. The chief purport of the book is to narrate the history of this relationship. The books are mainly historical and what they tell us is how God has dealt with man.

3. What the Bible contains of ritual and priestly matter belongs to the Jewish books, and such parts of these books are to the Christian of less importance. What the Christian cares for in the Jewish books is what in them points to Christ, or the preparation they describe of that new relation between God and man which came in Christ to full reality. The Bible, as Chris-



tians regard it, is not, accordingly, a ritualistic book nor a book of law.

4. The specially Christian books which are nearest to the believer are all new, that is to say they are the products of the early Christian movement itself. They do not, therefore, consist in any appreciable degree of *impedimenta*, but are all, broadly speaking, quickening to Christian faith.

5. The Christian Scriptures do not impose a creed. They contain several types of theology and the believer is placed by them in this respect in a position of freedom.

6. The Christian Scriptures do not contain any commentary. No commentary of the New Testament has ever imposed itself on the church as a whole, and the Christian church of each age is in a position to deal with the books at first hand and to form its own views of them.

7. The Christian Scriptures are mainly historical. They bring us face to face with many, at least, of the original facts of our religion, and enable us to be personally intimate with its Founder, and to nourish ourselves on the bread and the water which he himself dispensed to those who saw and heard and touched him.